THE
Dan Smoot Report

Vol. 15, No. 1 (Broadcast 698) January 6, 1969 Dallas, Texas

DAN SMOOT

THE PROPER ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

by Ezra Taft Benson

The following is an abbreviation of a speech by Dr. Ezra Taft Benson, a sensitive, humble, and compassionate man — a great and learned man — who was Secretary of Agriculture for eight years during the Eisenhower administration. It is regrettable that space limitation prohibits a reprinting here of the entire speech.

There are only two possible sources of human rights: they are either God-given or they are granted by government. If we accept the premise that human rights are granted by government, then we must accept the corollary that they can be denied by government. I shall never accept that premise. The great Thomas Jefferson asked:

"Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God?"

Frederic Bastiat, 19th century French political economist, phrased it succinctly:

"Life, liberty, and property do not exist because men have made laws. On the contrary, it was the fact that life, liberty, and property existed beforehand that caused men to make laws in the first place."

I support the doctrine of separation of church and state as traditionally interpreted to prohibit the establishment of an official national religion. But I am opposed to the doctrine of separation of church and state as currently interpreted to divorce government from any formal recognition of God. The current trend strikes a potentially fatal blow at the concept of the divine origin of our rights, and unlocks the door for an easy entry of future tyranny.

Since God created man with certain unalienable rights, and man, in turn, created government to help secure and safeguard those rights, it follows that man is superior to government and should remain master over it, not the other way around.

Government itself has no innate power or privilege to do anything. Its only source of authority and power is from the people who have created it. And the people can give to their creature, government,

THE DAN SMOOT REPORT is published weekly by The Dan Smoot Report, Inc., Box 9538, Dallas, Texas 75214 (office at 6441 Gaston Ave.). Subscriptions: $18.00 for 2 years; $10.00, 1 year; $6.00, 6 months. Dan Smoot was born in Missouri, reared in Texas. With BA and MA degrees from SMU (1938 and 1940), he joined the Harvard faculty (1941) as a Teaching Fellow, doing graduate work in American civilization. From 1942 to 1951, he was an FBI agent; from 1951 to 1955, a commentator on national radio and television. In 1955, he started his present independent, free-enterprise business: publishing this REPORT and abbreviating it each week for radio and TV broadcasts available for commercial sponsorship by business firms.

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only such powers as they, themselves, have in the first place. What powers properly belong to each person in the absence of and prior to the establishment of government?

Bastiat said:

"Each of us has a natural right—from God—to defend his person, his liberty, and his property. These are the three basic requirements of life, and the preservation of any one of them is completely dependent upon the preservation of the other two."

The early American pioneers in the "lawless west," spent a great deal of their time and energy defending themselves, their property, and their liberty. But a man cannot afford to spend his time constantly guarding his family, his fields, and his property; so, he joins with his neighbors and hires a sheriff. The individual citizens delegate to the sheriff their right to protect themselves. The sheriff does for them only what they had a right to do for themselves—nothing more.

Suppose pioneer "A" wants another horse. He doesn't have the money to buy one; but, since pioneer "B" has an extra horse, "A" decides that he is entitled to share in his neighbor's good fortune. Is he entitled to take his neighbor's horse? Obviously not!

If "A" has no proper power to take "B's" property, can he delegate any such power to the sheriff? No. Even if everyone in the community desires that "B" give his extra horse to "A," they have no right individually or collectively to force him to do it. And they cannot delegate to the sheriff or anyone else a power they themselves do not have.

This means that, by deriving its just powers from the governed, government becomes primarily a mechanism for defense against bodily harm, theft, and involuntary servitude. It cannot claim the power to redistribute wealth or force reluctant citizens to perform acts of charity against their will. Government is created by man. No man possesses such power to delegate. The creature cannot exceed the creator.

A standard I use in determining what law is good and what is bad is the Constitution of the United States. I regard this inspired document as a solemn agreement which every officer of government is under a sacred duty to obey.

The federal activity which today poses a grave danger to freedom is the activity *not* authorized by the Constitution—activity *not* within the proper sphere of government. No one has authority to grant powers for welfare programs, for schemes to redistribute wealth, and for activities which coerce people into acting in accordance with a prescribed code of social planning.

To be sure, there are times when this principle of limited government is most annoying. If I could only *force* the ignorant to provide for themselves, or the selfish to be generous with their wealth! But if we permit government to manufacture its own authority out of thin air, and to create self-proclaimed powers not delegated to it by the people, then the creature exceeds the creator and becomes master. Beyond that point, where shall the line be drawn? Who is to say, "this far, but no farther"? What clear *principle* will stay the hand of government from reaching farther and yet farther into our daily lives?

Once government steps over the clear line between the protective or negative role into the aggressive role of redistributing wealth and providing so-called "benefits" for some of its citizens, it then becomes an instrument for what Frederic Bastiat called *legalized plunder.*

Bastiat said:

"How is this legal plunder to be identified? Quite simply. See if the law takes from some persons what belongs to them, and gives it to other persons to whom it does not belong. See if the law benefits one citizen at the expense of another by doing what the citizen himself cannot do without committing a crime."

As Bastiat observed, and as history proves, each class or special interest group competes with others to throw the lever of governmental power in its favor, or at least to immunize itself against the effects of a previous thrust. Labor gets a minimum wage, so agriculture seeks a price support. Consumers demand price controls, and industry gets protective tariffs. In the end, no one is much further ahead; and everyone suffers the burdens of a gigantic bureaucracy and a loss of personal freedom. With each group out to get its share of the spoils, such governments historically have mush-

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roomed into total welfare states. Once the process begins — once the principle of the protective function of government gives way to the aggressive or redistributive function — then forces are set in motion that drive the nation toward totalitarianism.

James R. Evans, in his inspiring book, *The Glorious Quest*, gives this simple illustration of legalized plunder:

"Assume . . . that we were farmers, and that we received a letter from the government telling us that we were going to get a thousand dollars this year for ploughed up acreage. But rather than the normal method of collection, we were to take this letter and collect $61.71 from Bill Brown, at such and such an address, and $82.47 from Henry Jones, $59.80 from a Bill Smith, and so on down the line; that these men would make up our farm subsidy.

"Neither you nor I . . . would . . . walk up and ring a man's doorbell, hold out a hand and say, 'Give me what you've earned even though I have not.' We simply wouldn't do it because we would be facing directly the violation of a moral law, 'Thou shalt not steal.'"

According to Marxist doctrine, a human being is primarily an economic creature: his material well-being is all important; his privacy and his freedom are secondary. The Soviet constitution reflects this philosophy in its emphasis on security: food, clothing, housing, medical care — the same things that might be considered in a jail. The basic concept is that the government has full responsibility for the welfare of the people and, in order to discharge that responsibility, must assume control of all their activities.

It is significant that in actuality the Russian people have few of the "rights" supposedly "guaranteed" to them in their constitution, while Americans have them in abundance even though they are not guaranteed. The reason is that economic security simply cannot be guaranteed by any government. No government in history has ever created any wealth. Wealth is created by people who work. Unless the people bake one loaf of bread for each citizen, the government cannot guarantee that each will have one loaf. Constitutions can be written; laws can be passed; and imperial decrees can be issued; but unless the bread is produced, it can never be distributed.

What about the lame, the sick, and the destitute? Most countries have attempted to use the power of government to meet the needs of unfortunate individuals. Yet, in every case, the improvement has been marginal at best and has resulted, in the long run, in creating more misery, more poverty, and certainly less freedom than when government first stepped in. As Henry Grady Weaver wrote, in *The Mainspring of Human Progress*:

"Most of the major ills of the world have been caused by well-meaning people . . . obsessed with fanatical zeal to improve the lot of mankind-in-the-mass through some pet formula of their own . . . . The harm done by ordinary criminals, murderers, gangsters, and thieves is negligible in comparison with the agony inflicted upon human beings by the professional 'do-gooders,' who attempt to set themselves up as gods on earth and who would ruthlessly force their views on all others — with the abiding assurance that the end justifies the means."

America traditionally followed Jefferson's advice of relying on individual action and charity. The result was that, even during the depression of the 1930's, Americans ate and lived better than most people in other countries do today.

In summary, the only proper role of government is to protect life, liberty, and property; and the only proper taxation is the kind that is imposed uniformly, so that each person's property or income is taxed at the same rate. Anything more, or different, is usurpation and oppression.

It is unconstitutional for the federal government to deny the people their right to bear arms, to worship and pray when and where they please, or to own and control private property.

It is unconstitutional for the federal government to own or operate the means of producing and distributing goods and services in competition with private enterprise, or to regiment owners in the legitimate use of private property.

It is unconstitutional for the federal government to levy taxes to support state or local governments.

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It is unconstitutional for the federal government to levy taxes for gifts to foreign governments or individuals.

It is a direct violation of constitutional obligations for the federal government to weaken our military establishment below the point required for defense against invasion, or to commit our men, arms, or money to the control of foreign or world organizations.

It is wrong for the government to outlaw the use of honest money — of gold or silver coins as legal tender — and to issue irredeemable paper money as a circulating medium.

It is treason, as defined by the Constitution, to give aid and comfort to international communism — an implacable enemy with which we are at war.

Obviously, we have strayed far afield from legal, constitutional government.

Can we cut out the welfare-statism which has already fastened itself, like a cancerous growth, on our federal government? Could such drastic surgery be performed without endangering the country?

Surgery is necessary, and it will bring some discomfort and leave scar tissue; but it can be performed without undue risk.

Dropping all federal welfare-state programs at once would cause tremendous upheaval. They must be phased out. First, we should freeze all such federal programs at their present levels, making sure no new ones are added. Those requiring new legislation for continuation should be allowed to run out their terms with no renewal. Those which are indefinite in term should be reduced gradually until eliminated.

Congress should initiate this program of eliminating socialism; and the President should act as executive to administer the program, in accordance with proper constitutional procedures.

We must return to eternal verities. There is no other way. It will not be easy; but tyranny is never easily conquered; and we do have the consolation of knowing, as Thomas Paine said during the American Revolution, that "the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph."

I intend to keep fighting. I am resolved, not resigned.

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